

# The Curse

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Summary: A Grunt commits a most grievous crime and is executed for his actions. And then he wakes up.

## 1. Gift of Shame

Sangheili means Elite, Unggoy means Grunt.

\* \* \*

>"Beautifulâ€|" the Sangheili murmured to himself. <p>Rerek had to agree; the sight that lay before them was most impressive. A spherical object, pulsing with blue light, hung in the air over a bowl-shaped indentation in the floor. The object appeared crystalline, like a ball of frozen water, yet it had a sleek metallic surface veined with small grooves forming geometric shapes, and its light seemed to suggest a flame burning somewhere beneath the surface.<p>

"Yes, I shall leave at once to alert the Prophet of this glorious artifact," the Sangheili said confidently. "Rerek, stay here and make certain no others claim this find."

"Yes, Excellency," Rerek said. He watched as 'Kepmakee took his leave. After their Assault Carrier, the Divine Justice had shot down a Human vessel; several units had been sent to scout the area for enemy survivors. Rerek had spotted a small crevice in the hillside and had encouraged his leader to search it. He felt a burst of pride knowing he had helped uncover an artifact of the Forerunners, even knowing 'Kepmakee would take all the credit. He did, after all, exist to serve the Covenant.

He turned back to the artifact. Its beauty was unmatched. Rerek had to get a closer view. He took several steps towards the sphere, until he was right against the edge of the bowl. As he gazed at the artifact, his foot slipped over the edge. Instantly, the artifact flared with light and boiled as if it were liquid. Terrified he had

damaged it, Rerek leapt back, silently praying to the Forerunners. The orb shot out a beam of light, striking his chest. Intense pain spread throughout his body, causing him to collapse. Even as his vision went dim, he took one last look at the ball, only to weep in dismay. The artifact was no more than a burnt shell.

Rerek awoke to the hum of a healing chamber. He opened his eyes to see the violet interior of one. How odd! Such things were usually only given to high-ranked Sangheili. To allow an Unggoy its use was unthinkable. Something was wrong!

It all came back to him with a jolt. The orb, its beauty and its death. With a click, the chamber raised to reveal a Sangheili dressed in the white armor of the Special Forces.

"Unggoy," the Sangheili growled. "You have committed a grave crime and must be punished accordingly. Follow me."

Although he knew his punishment for the destruction of a Forerunner artifact would be horrible, he followed without pause, for he was a servant of the Covenant. The Sangheili led him into what he knew to be an execution chamber, and told him to enter a cage in the center. Gripped with misery he followed his orders and stepped inside of it, hearing it lock automatically. He was left alone with his fear for the next several minutes, managing to find some small comfort in the fact that the cage was built for a Sangheili and was thus too large to be as uncomfortable as intended.

Then, the doors opened and in walked several Honor Guards and a Prophet. He averted his eyes and saw an Unggoy enter from behind him, holding a holographic recorder. He turned back as a Sangheili stepped forward.

"The noble Prophet of Valor is here to witness the execution of a heretic, an Unggoy who has destroyed a valuable Forerunner artifact," the Sangheili stated. "Unggoy Rerek, do you have anything to say?"

"No, Excellency," he said simply.

"Then let us proceed." The Sangheili tapped a symbol on a control panel, causing his cage to ignite with orange flames. The pain was intense and he did not hold back his screams.

After what seemed like hours but what may have been minutes, the flames vanished. The cage opened and the white-armored Sangheili stepped over to him with an energy blade in his hand. So this is it, he thought. But it was not so, for the Sangheili merely cut off his chest armor to reveal the burn the artifact had given him.

"How do you feel?" the Sangheili asked him mockingly.

Shame at my failure, he felt like saying but instead answered truthfully. "Dead, Excellency." For life in such utter pain was not life at all, merely an imitation of its potency. Let us end it!

"Indeed," the Sangheili laughed. "Feel lucky, heretic, for you are the first Unggoy to receive this gift since the Age of Conflict."

\_Gift?\_ Rerek thought wearily as he struggled to remain standing. He peered at the Sangheili approaching him, carrying a staff. The staff was raised to reveal the bottom; glowing with heat, it bared the Mark of Shame. Rerek moaned with pure despair; the Mark was a curse given to the greatest of heretics, denying them entry into the afterlife. He would never enter the methane-filled paradise and rejoin his family, he would be lost. He could do nothing as the Sangheili slammed the seal into his chest with malice.

His own screams filled his ears, and he shut his eyes tightly as the Mark burned through his entire being. He worked to open his eyes and saw, not the Sangheili brandishing the Mark, but the artifact, pure in its beauty, striking him with the wrath of the gods. \_This is not real,\_ he realized amidst the fog of agony. \_My eyes are not open.\_ For he was still in the execution chamber, receiving the horrible curse. \_I am going to open my eyes,\_ he ordered himself through the haze. \_Open your eyes!\_ But as his true eyelids began to move, he felt the darkness overtake him.

## 2. Eyes of Another

"\_So as through a glass and darkly, the age long strife I see, Where I fought in many guises, many names, but always me.\_"

â€•General George S. Patton

Rerek opened his eyes, blinking, to find himself in a standard Unggoy's quartersâ€| yet something seemed very oddâ€| After a heartbeat, he realized it was the utter lack of pain, and then he remembered the day's events with shocking clarity. He looked down at his chest to find it whole and well, neither burn nor branding lay upon it.

\_Has it all simply been a dream?\_ He strongly doubted it; the pain of the punishment was far too real. \_Yet do not all dreams seem real as they occur?\_ He would have pondered it more but just then, an unfamiliar Unggoy dressed in the white armor of a Special Forces team opened the door.

"Better hurry, Popoh," the Unggoy said. "'Riaumee get impatient."

He was confused. Did this Unggoy think he was this Popoh? "Ehâ€| yes, me hurry," he said finally. The Unggoy blinked in acknowledgment, leaving him alone. He decided there was no point in dawdling, and turned to don his armor. He was confused to find shining white armor in place of his ordinary red, but continued to dress himself.

\_Perhaps this is also a dream?\_

He exited the quarters unsure how to proceed, but fortunately the Unggoy who had greeted him was still in the pit. The Unggoy nodded as he approached, entering the airlock with him close behind. He moved over to an air tank, checked it to be sure it was full, and then helped attach it to the Unggoy's armor. The Unggoy similarly helped him with his tank. They exited, Rerek (for that's who he was sure he was) attempting not to appear to be following his fellow.

As they traversed the halls, he recognized the layout as that of an Assault Carrier. \_Am I still on the Divine Justice?\_ he wondered.

They stepped into the gravity lift cargo area to join a group of four Unggoy and a Sangheili, all clad in white armor.

"Babaw, Popoh," the Sangheili ('Riaumee?) acknowledged curtly, turning to speak to the group. "It has been nearly a cycle since we first began our training, now we may at last begin our glorious task!" He indicated a large enclosed vehicle resting upon the lift plate, "With the Sidhe in the possession of the Covenant, we shall expand our reach to the darkest of oceans. No creature will ever evade our wrath in its depths again!"

\_Oceans? Sidhe? What creature ever evaded our wrath?\_ Rerek quickly pushed aside curiosity in place of excitement! This was a gift from the gods, a chance to redeem himself! \_My gods, I will serve you well,\_ he silently prayed, bowing his head appropriately.

Babaw poked him. He looked up to see 'Riaumee giving him a disapproving glance. "Er, sorry, Excellency," he apologized. "Meâ€| praying for luck."

To his surprise, the Sangheili's mandibles slipped into a ghost of a smile. "Fear not, Popoh," he said. "The gods smile down on us this night."

\_So they do!\_ Rerek thought with a grin as the Sangheili went on to declare:

"Let us now take Revelations on its noble quest!"

"Yes, Excellency," Rerek found himself crying along with the other Unggoy. He joined them as they raced for the 'Sidhe.' Hatches opened on all sides, and he followed Babaw inside.

In contrast to the royal purple exterior, the Sidhe's interior was a soft creamy pink. Although it was relatively small, the six of them sat comfortably at stations around the edges while 'Riaumee lay in the center to operate the controls. Fortunately, it seemed Popoh had no specific position, and Rerek was able to occupy a position on the side near Babaw.

"This is Revelations," 'Riaumee spoke into his radio, his voice tensed with barely restrained delight, "Send us into the deep!"

"Sidhe Revelations," their radios crackled, "Prepare for descent."

Rerek felt his enthusiasm grow as the vehicle shuddered and began to drop. Where are we? he wondered. What is our mission?

A heartcycle later, the Sidhe sharply slowed. It still continued to drop, but its movement was muted. Then the console in front of Rerek glowed and displayed a pattern of data. He frowned as he tried to interpret its message.

"We have penetrated her surface," 'Riaumee laughed. "Watch as we penetrate her depths!"

A sea of information scrolled across his console as his new commander engaged the propulsion. That's it, he realized. It's a sea. What

he was looking at was the digital representation of eight million tons of water flowing past the Sidhe's sensors.

After a while of examining the display, he began to understand what the designers were thinking. It was using a basic synesthetic algorithm based on Sangheili-ranked blood colorations and moving outward into the Asaa dialect. Wave flow, he smiled as he got it.

But then a few heartcycles later, he saw something he didn't recognize. It was very subtle, just an edge of lavender amongst turquoise, but it was certainly there. As he stared at it, he realized it was structured almost like the artlife generated by scientists.

"Babaw," he whispered to his fellow, "Thatâ€¦ animal?" He indicated the pattern.

Babaw's face lit up when he saw it. "No," he shook his head. "That plant! Excellency," he called, "Rerek find tree!"

"Tree?" he asked, confused. What tree grows this far underwater?

"You found it?" 'Riaumee asked, his voice serious. "Show me."

Rerek indicated the region containing the anomaly. "Bit of lavender," he said, trying to be helpful.

"So the Tree of Eternity is a true plant?" 'Riaumee wondered. "The Vikuli were hopelessly vague, but I had assumedâ€¦ Hmm."

"We will honor dead Prophets!" cried an Unggoy in delight.

"Let us not get ahead of ourselves," 'Riaumee said, although he did sound pleased. "We must first locate the artifact of our lords." He directed the Sidhe toward the plant.

Tree of Eternity? Rerek wondered. Artifact of our lords? What quest have the Forerunners sent me on?

"I see it," 'Riaumee said after a while. "The plant is luminous in this dark place. It is as if the gods are guiding us to our destination."

Maybe, Rerek thought, though the idea of such a plant unnerved him. He couldn't put his finger on what exactly felt wrong about it, but he was sure that there was something off about this situation. And what are the Vikuli?

"Gah!" an Unggoy screamed from behind him.

He blinked as he realized that the plant data made up three-quarters of his screen. "It bigâ€¦"

"Stay calm!" 'Riaumee snapped. Engaging a sound transfer device, the Sangheili called out to the plant, "Let us cast arms aside, and like discard our wrath! Thou, in faiâ€"!"

The tiny vessel shook roughly as it was struck by the plant. Screams

erupted around him, and he found his console's data screen replaced with a traditional combat view and cannon control. Unfortunately, Rerek had never used it before, and had to figure out the mechanism himself.

While this was only a brief setback, it cost valuable heartbeats. Despite the efforts of the six other members of his unit, the plant creature managed to rupture the Sidhe's shell. Water sprayed inside the vehicle, overwhelming their leader.

"No!" 'Riaumee cried as the liquid filled the Sidhe, cutting off his oxygen.

Rerek clamped his mask to his face to keep the water out, and breathed deep even as panic fought to overtake him as he found himself fully surrounded with water. Babaw and another Unggoy did the same, while the rest simply rolled around in terror â€“ much as he felt like doing. The Sangheili twitched horribly as the water filled his system, but managed to hit a controlâ€¢ and opened the hatches.

'Riaumee jumped out, still trying to find a way to live. Babaw and the other Unggoy capable of rational thinking followed short behind. Rerek, however, hesitated.

While this was obviously a gift from the gods, perhaps the point was to die a noble death. Would he be mocking the Forerunners by still trying to survive under such hopeless circumstances? Even if it was not heresy, was there still any point at all?

\_Yes,\_ he decided firmly. As long as he was alive, there was hope. The Forerunners would not have brought him back merely to die once more. \_There must be more to achieve.\_

So, with the sound of his heart filling his ears and methane gas filling his lungs, he leaped out the hatch. He was greeted immediately by the sight of a giant, transparent tendril casting a bright blue glow as it ate 'Riaumee, Babaw, and the other Unggoy whose name he had never learned.

The Unggoy stood no chance of escaping in their clunky armor, which weighted them down considerably. Rerek made himself freeze as he saw them become trapped in a net of tendrils, each actively seeking prey. The Sangheili put up a fight, ripping through the plant's flesh with his awesome strength, but even he succumbed to the lack of air eventually. The plant drew its prey toward what passed for a mouth, a hub of blue liquid inside the main tendril.

Rerek kept himself still, and simply sank. \_I'll just wait until I'm far away from it, then I'll try to reach the gravity lift,\_ he thought. Then he looked around.

\_By the Prophets!\_ The plant was larger than he had thought. Closer too.

No more than 3,000 units away was a massive stalk of luminescent material. Large tendrils were spread out as though trolling for prey, some coming almost as close as this one. It looked hopeless. It seemed to him that he had only three options, and none involved him surviving. He could make a futile attempt to swim back, simply sink

into oblivion, or take off his mask right then and there.

He shook his head. It was a difficult task â€“ nay, impossible! But he had to try to make it back to the ship.

Tilting himself in the direction opposite the Sidhe's path â€“ away from the hideous plant, he began kicking his legs. It was a slow process, and he wasn't even sure he made any progress. He made sure his right hand clamped the mask on tight, and then he used his left arm to help propel him forward.

However, it was not long at all before he saw the plant reaching his way. No! No! Damn this 'Eternal Tree' thing!

It was ridiculous. The Forerunners had spared his life only to send him to his death once more? There has to be a way out! But he could not figure it out in time.

The huge tendril descended upon him, numerous smaller tendrils seeking him as Lekgolo eels sought prey. Like ropes they coiled around his limbs, pulling him toward the waiting orifice. Get off of me!

He could only struggle helplessly while he was pushed inside the plant's hole and into a pool of acidic liquid. Gaah! Ah! Was this a punishment? Eternal pain? Was that it?

Answer me! he screamed silently to his gods. What did you bring me here for?

There was no answer.

The world went dark.

End  
file.